

February 2001

The Poor in Ames

Bethany Kohoutek
Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos>

Recommended Citation

Kohoutek, Bethany (2001) "The Poor in Ames," *Ethos*: Vol. 2001 , Article 6.
Available at: <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2001/iss3/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Publications at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ethos by an authorized editor of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.

The (Poor) Ames

//Not everyone in
Ames is affluent.
Ethos writer
Bethany Kohoutek
takes a look at a
problem that
many would
rather ignore.//

Sitting in a corner of the Emergency Residence Project shelter office, a diminutive woman named June leans forward, clutching a stack of invoices and bills.

"The pipes in my trailer froze, my car went in the ditch, and I lost my job. I don't know what I'm going to do now," she says quietly.

She has just finished filling out an application for residence assistance. Her voice trembles a little as she recounts her story.

She goes on to say that she only has running water in her bathtub, because after the pipes broke she couldn't afford it in the rest of her mobile home. When she wants to do the dishes, cook, or even flush the toilet, she hauls buckets of water from the bathtub.

"I told my landlord that I can't do this. I told them I'm going to churches and the food pantry and all these other places for assistance," she says earnestly. "I don't have money for food. I don't have a phone. And they said that it really wasn't their problem. They said they would take me to small claims court [if I can't pay rent]."

June was doing fine until recently. She had a good job and a decent place to live. Her ordeal is basically the result of an unlucky two-week period that could have happened to anyone. Everything that could go wrong went wrong. And even though she is doing all the right things to get herself over this bump in her life — like getting a new job and making do with bathtub water — it's not working, which is why she is here at the shelter seeking help.

"June's story is sad, but not unique," says Vic Moss, executive director of the Emergency Residence Project. And he would know. As the

director of the only adult homeless shelter in Ames, he regularly sees people and families walk the fine line between making ends meet and meeting a dead end.

Homelessness in Ames

Lurking underneath the seemingly affluent, professional surface of Ames, there is a subculture of people whose problems are life and death and stories are rarely heard. While the ranks of homeless are spiraling out of control, mercilessly leaving less fortunate people behind, the same economic forces are propelling other Ames residents to wealth and prosperity. This is a story about those who aren't making the cut or don't want to in the first place, a story of the ups and downs of life on the road — or the street.

Homelessness is a word that the average Iowa State college student probably doesn't think twice about. But even as students gripe about waiting for CyRide buses in the cold, someone is sleeping under a bridge only blocks away using a plastic sheet to keep warm. As students complain about small dorm rooms and shared bathrooms, one family per day is evicted in Ames because it can't make rent.

Students from larger cities may scoff at the notion that homelessness and poverty are major issues in Ames. Although there is no one begging for spare change on Lincoln Way, homelessness does exist in Ames. The fact that it is less of a problem than in other, larger cities just makes it worse. Because it isn't thrown in your face every day, it's easy to forget about these people.

"If a tornado came through Ames and blew away a dozen homes, it would be front-page news," Moss says. "And yet when we have this

kind of devastation happening on a daily basis where families are being broken apart by this, it's not covered at all."

Moss estimates that there are around 50 homeless people each night in Ames. There is no one way to stereotype this population. Each situation is different, and Moss says the shelter sees everyone from "saints to sinners."

Homeless children and runaways

Perhaps the segment of the population most affected by homelessness is children. Half of those homeless in Iowa are under the age of 18.

"The children may be the biggest reason we should be doing something," Moss says. "The kids' willingness to believe in the adult world being able to meet their needs and therefore earn their trust and respect is sometimes demolished very early in their lives. Their parents are being evicted and are so preoccupied with their own needs and trying to survive, that they're not taking the kids to Little League practice. So there are a lot of kids growing up really isolated."

Kids today are being challenged in ways that no one would have dreamed of fifteen years ago, says Terri Johanson, who runs a youth shelter for Youth and Shelter Services. Higher divorce rates, more blended families and increasing numbers of young, single-parent families are creating increasingly diverse needs, putting pressures on kids that they aren't ready to deal with. The shelter run by Johanson, Rosedale Shelter in downtown Ames, stays consistently full with youth ages 10 to 17 who have nowhere else to go.

"My hope is that by coming here, they are learning to develop some discipline and boundaries in their lives that will help them down the road," she says.

Usually after working through their behavioral, discipline, and interaction problems at Rosedale, a significant number of the shelter's clients are able to return home or to foster care, though the treatment doesn't stop there. Most of the kids leave the shelter with a long-term plan, which could include regular appointments with a counselor, psychiatrist, or social services worker, in order to ensure that they continue improving.

But other kids aren't as lucky. Some kids head straight for the street and stay there, for a multitude of reasons, including unresolved arguments with family members, physical or sexual abuse, and trouble with the law, says Iowa State sociology professors Danny Hoyt and Les Whitbeck. Hoyt and Whitbeck have been studying the problem of youth on the street, co-directing the Midwest Homeless and Runaway Adolescent Project.

While on the street, Whitbeck says kids face adult situations they aren't ready to cope with. According to the study, they are likely to engage in sex earlier, and are typically exposed to more drugs, crime, rape, and violent assaults than their peers in the same age bracket.

He explains that the typical child welfare system will not work with the runaway popula-

It used to be that there was a sense of commonality. A lot of people wanted Ames to be a place where they could live, where their plumbers could live, where everybody could live. But that's not happening.



tion, because the system is designed to deal with children, not pseudo-adult runaways.

And with no intervention, the future for these runaways is grim.

As kids get deeper into negative behaviors, like leaving home, being expelled from school and racking up a criminal record, it becomes tougher and tougher for them to get back on the right track.

"Once kids get on this trajectory, there are more negative responses that will perpetrate these behaviors rather than positive ones that will change it," says Whitbeck.

Life on the Road

Some people living in Ames without a home do have options. But according to them, street life is the best option.

At 4:15 on a Saturday afternoon, there are seven men congregated in the living room of the Emergency Adult Project adult shelter. They have just come back from work, and the atmosphere is laid back and comfortable as the men chat amiably with each other.

This population of single, transient men (and the occasional woman) makes up the majority of the shelter's clientele. These men come and go, with no intention of staying in Ames for any substantial amount of time. However, they make up a large percentage of Ames' homeless statistics. The difference between this population and other homeless children and families in Ames is that most of the men in the living room do not want get into permanent housing, even if it was provided for them. They insist they're homeless by personal choice, not because of any particular hardship. The self-bestowed title of "hobo" is a term of endearment to them. Some have road names like Duke and Bullet, and speak of fellow travelers with names like Little Lizzie, the Road King, and Dakota Butch.

These men usually come to shelters to take a temporary rest from their travels to "bathe, eat, sleep, be at peace, and still make a little money," says Bullet.

"There's a difference between 'without a home' and 'homeless,'" Bullet explains. "Most people don't even know what a real hobo is. A hobo is without a home because he chooses to be. He is a man who is a traveler at heart. He works. He has clothes. He has money in his pocket. If he wants prime rib for dinner, he can reach into his pocket and pay for it."

The men have various reasons for being on the road. Some have been on the road since their early teen years, and it is all they know. Others may have gone through a divorce or lost a job. Still others may have had a steady job and a family, and simply "burned out" on the routine of day-to-day life.

"We don't want to settle down and accept the political society," says Bullet. "No president, no government is gonna to tell us what we're gonna to do. We will not be told 'You will get up at 6:00. You will get to work by 7:00. You will punch the clock by 7:01. Then you will punch out at 3:30.' It's monotony. With us,

that just doesn't work. Everyday is a new adventure. We are one of the last signs of real, true freedom."

Duke, who is 57 years old, "rides the rails" to get from place to place.

He left home at 14 because he wanted to travel - to see the country, meet new people, and because "it's a lot easier and a lot more mellow this way." He has four children and seven grandchildren who live in various places around the country. He occasionally sees them when he is in the neighborhood. If he gets bored staying in one place too long, it doesn't take much for him to "kick mud," to move on. He says he has been to every state in the contiguous United States as well as Mexico and Canada. He likes Iowa because people seem outgoing and friendly to him.

Shelter stays are fairly uncommon for him; he would rather sleep outside in his tent, even in the winter.

"I've been out here so long, I know how to live out in this. It's all just experience," he says.

Wherever he goes, he carries a 65-pound pack on his back that holds his tent, a change of clothes, campfire-making materials, a flashlight, string, a bedroll, a tarp, and a folded up sign that says "Will Work For Food. Thanks. God Bless." Most of his money is spent on groceries and tobacco, and besides his smokers' cough, he says he rarely gets sick.

Others have entirely different reasons for traveling.

Tim, who is one of the younger men in the shelter's living room, graduated from Iowa State with a degree in English. He actually had two religious poems and a short story published in *Ethos*. He said that in the future he plans to settle down, get married and have a family.

"I'm a Christian; I hitchhike by faith," he



No president, no government is gonna to, tell us what we're gonna to do. We will not be told 'You will get up at 6:00. You will get to work by 7:00. You will punch the clock by 7:01. Then you will punch out at 3:30.' It's monotony.

says. "I am being led by the Holy Spirit wherever I go. I share my faith with other people. I've met a lot of great people, and I've learned a lot from them. In fact, these pants were given to me by a family in Texas. My coat was given to me by a guy in Wyoming. Things like that. You meet so many neat people. I can't complain."

Hearing Tim talk, Bullet is quick to interject that things aren't always so easy going on the road.

"Everybody always tries to glorify it. You

don't hear about the nights under the bridge, or sleeping alongside the interstate in the rain and cold. You don't hear about standing out there on a ramp when it is 35 below zero wind chill, and you got frost formed to your mustache and your hair. It can be real tough, lonely, scary. That's the downside."

"I think Bob Seger said it best," says Bullet, "Turn the page." Life's like a book. Each day you turn the page to something different. It could be great, or it could be a real shithole."

Moss says that usually during summer months, there are some people who live under bridges, along the railroad, and in the wooded areas in Ames.

There is one such place under a bridge not far from campus. Plywood and plastic sheeting have been set up to make a little lean-to against the girders of the underside of the bridge. Bags of collected cans and bottles surround a green sleeping bag that is neatly laid out on the dirt. Nearby is a blackened spot in the dirt, which still smells of charcoal and lighter fluid, and various food cans are scattered around the fire pit.

There is a greening picture of the face of Jesus looking heavenward duck-taped to the cement that forms the back wall of the makeshift dwelling. A six-inch angel statue, in perfect condition, is standing upright on the ground nearby, surrounded by other miscellaneous items — Hy-Vee Charcoal Starters, an empty pack of Camel Lights, a few bottles of Hawkeye vodka, an old pair of jeans, and a few T-shirts.

"There are sometimes half a dozen people camping throughout town that never hear about the shelter," Moss says. And as bad as things look, they're just getting worse for the city's unfortunate.

Ames' Housing crisis

"For people coming into Ames there should be a sign that says, 'Poor are Unwelcome in This Town,' because there is no place for them to live," Moss says.

About one-third to one-fourth of the people who actually stay at the shelter have been evicted from their homes. Far more people, like June, are helped through the homeless prevention program, in which people are given assistance before they become homeless and have to come to the shelter as a last resort. Over 600 people were helped last year through the prevention program, Moss says.

But why are so many people barely squeaking by in a middle-class, educated city like Ames?

The main culprit of the problem in Ames is the lack of affordable housing, says Moss.

"Each year housing costs go up faster than incomes for people in the lower income ranges. It's just like a bar they have to get over each year that keeps going up," Moss says. "It is a little worse in Ames than in other parts of the state because of the student population creating a demand for housing. Landlords are able to charge practically as much as they want."



I don't have money for food. I don't have a phone. And they said that it really wasn't their problem. They said they would take me to small claims court if I can't pay rent!

Of all Ames households, one-third cannot afford the home they are currently living in, according to a study done by the Ames — Story County Housing Assessment Study. This is based on a widely accepted standard that housing costs should not exceed 30 percent of a person's income.

Blue-collar workers are finding it harder and harder to keep up with house and apartment payments each month. This is causing Ames to slowly strangle its service workers, the very people who keep the city operational.

Besides the service sector, another population that is being hit hard is young, single parent households.

"Typically two-thirds of the families that we see are single-mother families. They might already be working full-time and doing everything you could ask them to do and yet they can't afford a place to live. Sometimes it's just a matter of waiting here [at the shelter and in transitional housing] until their name comes to

the top of the list for low-income housing," Moss says.

What Can Be Done

"Anytime you have a situation that is evolving like it is here in Ames, you have to realize that if the present system isn't working, then you need to make some changes. And in this case, they would have to be pretty substantial," Moss says.

And with relatively little public knowledge of the problem, and therefore little support, executing solutions can seem near impossible. Thus, the first logical step is for community members to take steps to educate themselves by being aware of what is going on outside their own backyards, or beyond the Iowa State campus. A good way to do this is by supporting service organizations like United Way, reading and learning about the issues, and writing letters to local and state governments. Mentoring an Ames child is also a very personal and rewarding way to get involved.

The only long-term, definitive answer that Moss can see for Ames is a "radical" reformation of housing policies, not only in Ames, but also throughout the nation. He is involved with several local and national groups that have come up with proposed long-term solutions. One is called a community land trust, in which public funds are specifically allocated for low-income housing.

But start-up costs are enormous, and programs like these lack the public and governmental support that they need to get off the ground.

Until a viable solution is found, families will continue being evicted daily, and children will continue to stand at the doorstep of a society that is running out of ways to meet even their most basic needs.

The only thing left to do for many people is to keep hoping for change, and trust that people like Moss and Johanson continue to roll up their sleeves and tirelessly combat the problem at the most direct levels every day. And though it is on a case-by-case, individual level, this caring attitude helps uplift people during the most destitute and desperate times of their lives.

Despite her mounting bills and the prospect of being taken to court for something she can't control, June still tries to look at the bright side.

"I think I've had the worst two weeks of my life," she says, "But on the other hand — and you're gonna think I'm crazy — it's also been the best two weeks of my life. And the reason is because I have had so many people show me goodness and kindness. Someone has always been there. Churches have been gracious to me. He [Moss] has been gracious to me. There's a lot of good people out there who are trying really hard to help. Sometimes it's hard to believe that, but there are. Especially when you're the worst off you could ever be."

Bethany Koboušek is a sophomore in journalism. This is her first cover story for Ethos.